

ICC clears its final environmental study

by Janel Davis

Staff Writer

The proposed Intercounty Connector highway cleared a huge potential roadblock this week with the release of a long-awaited environmental study.

The State and Federal Highway Administrations completed the required Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) for the 18-mile toll highway, planned for decades to link Prince George's and Montgomery counties between I-95 and I-270.

The impact statement accepted a route proposed by Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R) last year that included a bike path and long bridges minimizing wetland impact. Ehrlich's proposal, estimated at \$2.1 billion, has since ballooned to \$2.4 billion due to inflation costs.

Additional FEIS modifications include environmentally friendly

initiatives like building storm water management systems and designing more steep slopes to reduce the impact on natural habitats.

"For every acre of park land involved in the project, we are replacing that with eight acres," said Robert L. Flanagan, Maryland's Transportation secretary. "The newly owned acreage is what Park and Planning wanted in Montgomery County, and we were able to negotiate that."

The next step in the approval process is a 45-day public comment period ending Feb. 27. The FEIS is available for viewing at www.iccstudy.org.

Following the response period and approvals from the Army Corps of Engineers and the federal government, the state can move forward with declaring rights of way and issuing design build contracts.

See **ICC**, page A-4

Gazette 1-6-06

ICC

Continued from page A-1

Barring further complications, Flanagan said, construction should begin this fall. There is no date yet set for project completion.

County Council president George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park called the ICC a critical piece of the county's 10-year transportation plan. "The approval is an important milestone in starting ICC construction. It's about time."

But not all council members are on board. Last week, Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg and Marilyn J. Praisner (D-Dist. 4) of Calverton, both longtime foes of the ICC, held a press conference saying that the tolls for the highway would be too high for many county residents.

"I think ICC opponents have held the general public hostage

Intercounty Connector

- **Toll highway** would connect I-95 and I-270

- **Cost:** \$2.4 billion

- **Next step:** review by the federal government and Army Corps of Engineers

- **Scheduled groundbreaking:** Fall 2006

- **Final environmental impact statement** at www.iccstudy.org

long enough, and I don't think the public will put up with the traffic congestion," said Bob Grow, government relations director with the Greater Washington Board of Trade. "For opponents, I think the train has left the station."

For years, the ICC has been

touted by proponents as a partial solution to the county's traffic problems. Studies have shown that the road could reduce congestion in some areas as much as 50 percent. But opponents have challenged the plan at every turn, citing its potential for destroying parks and neighborhoods.

The Audubon Naturalist Society, which estimates actual costs for the project at \$3 billion, launched another anti-ICC television campaign last week, saying the state failed to consider other options to reduce traffic congestion.

"This was incomplete from the very start," said Brian Henry, the society's ICC organizer, this week following the FEIS release. "The traffic analysis is extremely weak; there are huge gaping holes, and a 45-day review is not enough."

The society is calling for a 90-day public review period and urging public officials to consid-

er its version of traffic reduction alternatives.

But delays are behind the increasing costs, said Richard N. Parsons, president of the Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce.

"For every year of delay we're paying \$100 million in construction inflation costs," Parsons said. "I think there is a lot of desperation on the opponents' side. The fact is that you cannot go decade after decade without building new highways when the number of commuters continues to increase."

State highway officials do not expect any objections from the legislature in the upcoming session.

"A state legislator or public official who would balk at the ICC would do so at their own peril because there is overwhelming public support," Parsons said. "If you're not responding to traffic congestion, you're not doing your job."